

SCANDALOUS KNOWLEDGE: SCIENCE, TRUST AND THE HUMAN. *Science and Cultural Theory*.

By Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Durham (North Carolina): Duke University Press. \$74.95 (hardcover); \$21.95 (paper). ix + 198 p; ill.; index. ISBN: 0-8223-3810-6 (hc); 0-8223-3848-3 (pb). [First published by Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2005.] 2006.

Scientists have been involved in a tradition of skeptical self-criticism dating back at least to Bacon. Yet, many scholars who take science and scientists as their object of study treat it as their own breakthrough discovery that scientists are human and, therefore, subject to the same defective propagandizing and collective delusion as others of our species. Still, scientists generally believe that their practices produce a more reliable form of knowledge than prophets, politicians, or professors of literature do—claims that critics view as self-aggrandizing myths sold to a credulous world. Such claims are also undermined by what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls the “scandal of knowledge”—that there is no consensus among philosophers about what knowledge really is or what it means to say that a theory (or fact) is true. According to the constructivist perspective of Herrnstein Smith, “facts are not prior, fixed and autonomously determinate features of an external world” (p 49). Targeting the presumed philosophical and human weaknesses of scientists, such deflationary critiques gained widespread favor in the humanities, precipitating the Science Wars as scientists struck back. For example, Sokal perpetrated his famous hoax on the Duke University Press journal *Social Text*, and with Bricmont went on to document in enormous and withering detail how many of the leaders of the constructivist movement were embarrassingly ignorant of the science they discussed, while pretentiously affecting an expertise they lacked.

Herrnstein Smith’s *Scandalous Knowledge* is the first book in the new Duke University Press series *Science and Cultural Theory* (which she edits), and constitutes her reply to those who have expressed dissatisfaction with how cultural theory and constructivism have been applied to science. The author was clearly stung by these reverses, and her book has an unrelievedly angry and partisan

tone as she settles scores and issues proclamations unaccompanied by argumentation. Her targets are those who have challenged constructivists (such as us), or fellow constructivists who acknowledge that some of their colleagues have embraced unsupportable forms of relativism. In her concern to rehabilitate the status (rather than the logic) of her project, the genuine and fascinating questions that the sociology and philosophy of science raise remain unaddressed. Perhaps the next volume in the series will tackle the questions she neglects: What is truth, and what methods and practices in the sciences (if any) enable its discovery?

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